

**Meeting of Customer Complaints Task Group
- Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny
Committee**

4 November 2010

Customer Complaints Review - Scoping Report

Purpose of Report

1. This report asks Members to agree a workplan and provides information gathered to date in support of the Customer Complaints scrutiny review.

Background to CYC Customer Services

2. In July 2009, following an extensive staff and public consultation process, the Executive approved a Customer Strategy which included a new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and Procedures (see Annex A). Within the Strategy's action plan there was an action to: 'Implement the new feedback and complaints policy by September 2009'.
3. In the Autumn of 2009 the Customer Strategy Action Plan was superseded by the Customer Services Blueprint as part of the More for York Programme. This work is scheduled for completion by the end of 2010 (dependant on possible revised development timescales for the IT system), and carries a savings target of £38,000 in 2010/11, with a further £63,000 by the end of 2012.

Background to Review

4. At a meeting of the Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee in September 2010, members received a presentation on Customer Services from Assistant Director Customers & People. Having considered an overview of current services, performance and developments, the committee recognised that whilst there is a corporate policy in existence, currently each individual CYC Directorate currently has its own methods for recording and responding to complaints. And, an unknown proportion of complaints are dealt with as enquiries and therefore fall outside of any formal process.
5. As there is no corporate monitoring or management information of performance in this area, the Committee questioned whether the new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and procedures are fit for purpose. In order to ensure its future effectiveness and in an effort to inform its design and priorities, the Committee agreed to form a Task Group to carry out a scrutiny review on their behalf, of customer feedback/complaints and resulting actions.

6. The Committee set a timeframe of within 3 months for completion of the review and agreed the following review remit:

Overall Aim

To inform the design and priorities within the new complaints function in order to ensure its future effectiveness, identifying any revisions required to the Feedback Policy.

Objectives

- i. Reduce the number of common or repeat complaints.
- ii. Reduce the number of complaints to the Ombudsman.
- iii. Contribute to possible further efficiency savings
- iv. Improve the customer experience (customer satisfaction to be measured and monitored).

Information Gathered To Date

7. Customer Services Blueprint

In the Autumn of 2009 the Customer Strategy Action Plan was superseded by the Customer Services Blueprint as part of the More for York Programme. This described the work that would be undertaken to create a new Customer Services organisation and built upon the Customer Access Strategy (2005) and Customer Strategy (2009), which had shaped the way in which CYC wanted to engage with its customers – see extract from Blueprint at Annex B.

8. In this model, at the heart of customer service delivery, is the York Customer Centre(YCC) incorporating all customer facing services including telephony, face-to-face and electronic access channels. One of the underlying principles for the delivery of the blueprint was the business case that demonstrated the benefits of developing a single customer services delivery organisation, in advance of the move to a new Council HQ. As part of the overall strategy and in order to establish and monitor the needs and expectations of the customers, a Project Plan for this workstream was agreed which included the centralisation of all customer complaints/feedback (within the YCC), by what ever channel it comes in on, including all complaints, comments, compliments, FOI requests and Members enquiries/requests – see timetable and tasks within project plan at Annex C.

9. Overview of existing processes in York

The current York model follows recognised best practice by dealing with complaints in stages. Stages are effectively escalation and may imply or even signpost different levels of authority and competence to providing solutions. The stages are:

- Stage 1 the person who provided the service;
 - Stage 2 the manager of the service (manager of the stage 1 person);
 - Stage 3 the Director (manager of the manager of the stage 1 person) or nominated complaints officer.
10. There is then an option within stage 3, though it could be considered a de facto Stage 4, to refer the complaint to the Chief Executive which theoretically is the first

bit of independent consideration brought to bear (the exception being in ACE where the complaints team are independent of operational services – it is proposed that the new structures will be built around this existing organisation).

11. In practice the response is frequently garnered from consultation with those involved in stages 1-3. So complaints consideration and resolution is almost wholly undertaken in the delivery silos they relate to. This is certainly not considered best practice but used here to illustrate the point that even if we accept we have a best practice procedure, how we resource and run it are critical to its credibility for customers, staff and LGO alike.
12. A high-level process map of our current procedure is shown at Annex D. As mentioned above there will be differences from directorate to directorate in how these processes are applied.
13. On the working assumption that the majority of complaints begin life at stage 1 before 'escalating' and bearing in mind that there is no council-wide requirement to record stage 1 complaints, we cannot be sure about the total number of stage 1 complaints received. The implications of this are that we are delivering a message to staff that stage 1 complaints are not 'as serious' as later stages. By not capturing the issues from stage 1 complaints, we are not able to use these and their resolution as lessons to help us plan and modify aspects of our services. Nor do we know how effective we are resolving complaints at stage 1.
14. When the current procedure was first agreed, it was on the assumption that the number of stage 1 complaints would be such that, to deal with them all in a similar manner, would create an unsupportable administrative burden. We simply don't know if this would have been the case.
15. Staff have identified that complaints are sometimes treated as stage 2 or 3 at the first time of asking, depending upon who makes them but even then we are aware that some complaints are being fast tracked or classified incorrectly. Depending upon the urgency, significance or importance of the issue this isn't necessarily a bad thing, but used regularly this could undermine the integrity of the process.
16. Once our procedure is exhausted there's the Local Government Ombudsman. Their investigation, if they decide to proceed with one, requires information from all the above stages the customer has been through.
17. The model for the new structure/organisation/process
The new policy/procedures have been designed to provide a consistent approach across the council for learning from complaints and highlighting areas for service improvements. This information will allow the Council to:
 - Identify areas of dissatisfaction with services
 - Highlight areas for service improvement
 - Monitor the success of service improvements bases on the number of complaints subsequently received
 - Support our equalities, engagement and customer strategies

18. The new organisational model has been designed to enable CYC to deliver services in a joined up way with the focus on the customer. We need to radically change the shape of the organisation so that existing service silos are no longer prevalent and do not constrain the effectiveness of the service delivery. By the establishment of a centralised team in the YCC the Council will get the benefits of:
- Common standards of response,
 - Focused attention to all feedback,
 - Economies of scale,
 - Consistent measuring and monitoring,
 - Meaningful and relevant reporting,
 - Trend analysis and feedback mechanisms that will be used to inform continuous improvement initiatives,
 - Improved Customer Insight data,
 - Pro-active control and planning to reduce the numbers of complaints received.
19. The new corporate complaints and feedback policy provides an easy-to-use complaints procedure, which includes a commitment to deal with problems fully and solve them wherever possible within a set time limit. It will demonstrate that the Council listens to its customers' views and is responsive to comments made by members of the public. The policy ensures that the new feedback and complaints system:
- a. Is easily accessible and understandable
 - b. Is acknowledged and published as a model for developing good practice
 - c. Ensures a thorough and fair investigation within set time-scales
 - d. Provides an effective response and appropriate redress
 - e. Is confidential
 - f. Provides feedback to management so that areas of dissatisfaction can be improved
 - g. Keeps complainants informed of progress

Suggested Workplan for Task Group

20. In regard to the first two objectives of this review i.e. to understand the number and type of complaints being received across the council, data from 1st January 2010 to date is currently being gathered from each Directorate on the following:
- public complaints/enquiries,
 - Councillor enquiries,
 - complaints to the Ombudsman
 - Freedom of Information requests
21. As there is currently no corporate database where the details of these are recorded, and as each Directorate has its own methods for handling them, the process of gathering and collating the information is taking some time . However, this information should be available in time for the next Task Group meeting.
22. In regard to objectives (iii) & (iv) and in order to further inform the design and priorities within the new complaints function, it is suggested that the Committee

consider and compare the proposed corporate procedures detailed in the new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy - see Annex A, against the different methods of dealing with complaints/enquiries currently being undertaken in individual Directorates - details of these are shown at Annex C.

23. With these suggestions in mind and in order to complete the review within the agreed timeframe, the Task Group will need to agree a number of future meeting dates - see suggested workplan below:

Suggested Meetings Dates	Suggested Workplan
<u>Meeting 1</u> 4 November 2010 1:30 - 3pm	Consider scoping report containing information gathered to date, and agree future meeting dates and workplan
<u>Meeting 2</u> 16 Nov (am). 18 Nov (pm), or 19 Nov (after 2pm)	Receive interim report presenting: 1. Information on national best practice regarding the handling of complaints etc by local authorities e.g. centralised or not?, and most recent annual Ombudsman Report. 2. Directorate information on number and type of complaints received since 1 January 2010 including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaints from public • Councillor requests/inquiries • Complaints to Ombudsman • FOIs Identify: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relevant consultees and any issues to be addressed through consultation at the next meeting • any additional information required
<u>Meeting 3</u> w/c 6 Dec ?	Receive interim report and consult with relevant parties Based on information gathered, suggest any: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possible further efficiency savings • further improvements to customer experience
<u>Meeting 4</u> 4 Jan 2011	Consider draft final report containing suggested recommendations
11 January 2011	Presentation of final report to Effective Organisation O & S Committee

Consultation

24. The Assistant Director Customers & People will be present at the meeting to assist the Task Group with their work on this review.

Options

25. Having considered the information provided within this report and its associated Annexes, Members may choose to:
 - Extend the period from which information has been gathered in support of this review i.e. consider information from pre January 2010
 - Amend the suggested workplan shown in the table at paragraph 11
 - Identify any relevant consultees

Implications

26. **Financial & HR** - More for York savings are associated with the centralisation of complaints teams.
27. **Equalities** All proposals contained in the Customer Strategy have been fully consulted upon and the work is covered by an Equalities Impact Assessment.
28. **Legal** Improvement of complaints handling may contribute to less cases reaching the Ombudsman. Centralisation of Freedom of Information requests will aid compliance with legislation on this matter.
29. **Information Technology (IT)** Resources are committed to providing the technology necessary for the newly centralised team.
30. There are no Crime and Disorder, Property or other implications.

Corporate Strategy

31. This review supports to the Council's Effective Organisation priority around 'providing what customers want'.

Risk Management

32. Improvement in the management of complaints and resulting service improvement will reduce the risk of negative publicity and the Ombudsman publicly criticising the council for maladministration. Improvement in the processing of Freedom of Information requests will minimise risks of the Information Commissioner imposing large fines on the organisation relating to its use of information.

Recommendations

33. Members are recommended to:
 - i. Agree a workplan for the review including a number of future meeting dates

- ii. Identify what if any further information should be sought in support of the review
- iii. Identify any relevant consultees

Reason: To progress this review in line with scrutiny procedures, protocols and workplans.

Contact Details

Author:

Melanie Carr
Scrutiny Officer
Scrutiny Services
Tel No. 01904 552063

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

Andrew Docherty
Assistant Director Legal, Governance & ITT

Report Approved

Date

1 November 2010

Specialist Implications Officer(s)

Wards Affected:

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Customer Strategy
Customer Services Blueprint

Annexes

- Annex A** – Customer Feedback Policy & Procedure 2009
- Annex B** – Extract from Customer Services Blueprint
- Annex C** – Blueprint Project Plan – Timetable and Tasks
- Annex D** – Process Map for Current Complaints Procedure